Film & Culture

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The British Documentary Film Movement from the mid-1920s to the mid-1940s: Its Social, Political, and Aesthetic Context

MIKLÓS LOJKÓ

The history of the British film industry and the art of British film making is inextricably linked with the early production of socially sensitive documentary films. This connection has largely been forgotten in our time. The following article is intended to revive and underline this link.

During the 1920s, partly as a consequence of the introduction of universal suffrage and the growing government intervention in the lives of everyday people, politicians, in particular those on the right (Swann 2) felt the need to pay much greater attention to public opinion and public morale. During the Great War, especially from 1917 when David Lloyd George's ideas of emergency governance had started to take shape, in addition to total economic and financial leverage, the government took control of new and wide ranging areas of social policy as well as propaganda (Buitenhuis). British Pathé Newsreel, relaunched after the war with a ten-year delay in 1928, focusing on the lives of celebrities, the royal family and grandiose foreign diplomatic events or wars, was, apart from the glamour, of little real interest to the average cinema goer. The BBC, in its infancy at that time, was also using famously stilted language and very few on-location interviews. There was growing circumstantial evidence, substantiated from 1937, when Mass-Observation began its work, to show that the general British public felt alienated from the traditional hierarchies of British power and politics. Therefore, it is significant that exponents of the new documentary film movement, John Grierson, Basil Wright, Edgar Antsey, Arthur Elton, Albetro Cavalvanti and others, can be credited with introducing a new vocabulary of democracy into mass communication in Britain.

In the aftermath of the war, many civil servants remained impressed by the way wartime propaganda caught the imagination of the British public. The nation had been drawn together in more ways than ever before. Yet, the key impetus came via the United States where similar circumstances had led to similar developments. In *Public Opinion* (1921), the noted American public intellectual Walter Lippmann, poignantly quoted Plato's *Republic* leaving no doubt as to the contemporary western social implications:

> Behold! human beings living in a sort of underground den, / which has a mouth open towards the light and reaching all across / the den; they have been here

> from their childhood, and have their / legs and necks chained so that they cannot move, and can only / see before them. (qtd. in Lippmann vii)

The book became influential in Britain beyond expectations. It was partly in the lure of this book that John Grierson, the future anchor and energising spirit of the British documentary film movement, together with other ambitious, Scottish-born hopefuls, like John Reith and the advertising magnate William Crawford, went to the United States in 1924 on a Rockefeller scholarship (Swann 3). Significantly, Grierson's activities in the US showed more parallels with Crawford than Reith, soon to be the iconic head of the BBC in London. Grierson had read English and Moral Philosophy at Glasgow University and went on to study the Psychology of Propaganda at the universities of Chicago, Columbia and Wisconsin-Madison, acquiring a propaganda and public relations expertise that he would later import to the UK. The American advertising agencies were among the earliest to utilise modern art in their craft. Many of the modernist pictorial art movements were incorporated into commercial advertising in the United States. Grierson was impressed by the tabloid press and the cinema in the US, both aimed unapologetically at a general audience, instead of the intellectual and social elites traditionally targeted in the United Kingdom.

Grierson was essentially a nineteenth century communitarian liberal and believed in the social, communal responsibility of the individual. He was "an elitist with populist inclinations throughout his life," who, when political life in Britain and elsewhere began to polarise in the 1930s, departed on a journey to the left, stopping short, however, of becoming a communist (Swann 5–6). Grierson's early convictions, including the Scots Presbyterian background, combined with his formative experience in the United States, resulted in a peculiar, virtually missionary, vision for reengaging ordinary men and women with the democratic process for which so many had fought but which seemed so remote from the perspective of the post-war years. Agreeing with Walter Lippmann, he blamed the erosion of democracy at least partly on the fact that the social complexities of contemporary society made it nearly impossible for the public to participate in processes vital to the survival of democratic society. Grierson announced

this vision in an American film trade magazine as follows:

> The modern multitudes ... [crave] for participation in a world where dreams come true, where life is more free, more powerful, more pungent, more obviously dramatic [...] In the meanwhile, the old folk worlds, the worlds of established heroes [...] and so dead and so distant that the multitude have lost touch with them and the imagination of the average people are [*sic*] without a sticking point. (Swann 7)

Grierson arrived back in the UK in 1927, imbued with the conviction that a certain new type of film could and should be mobilized to deal with the perennial problems of economic hardship shared by most throughout the twenties and into the Great Depression and to build national morale and consensus. He joined the Empire Marketing Board, a government department founded as an offspring of the Department of Overseas Trade in 1926 by Colonial Secretary Leo Amery, on a close analogy to the Federation of British Industries (FBI), to promote trade relations within the British Empire. Grierson acquired powerful supporters in high places for his ambitions to create a modern link between the political message and the population. Among the facilitators was Sir Stephen Tallents, a senior British civil servant, who gave Grierson his first opportunity as the EMB's film officer (Swann 12–13). He directed his first film, the fifty-minute long *Drifters* (1929).

The American roots of British mass audience cinema have recently been studied with care, but little has been said about the Soviet Russian parallels. The glorification of the worker and the heroic-victorious dignity of the work process itself is evident in Grierson's *Drifters*. The vibrant, dramatic music underlies the theme that these fishermen (herring drifters with floating nets attached to their boats) are at the forefront of creation, the vanguard of the battle for a better future. At the beginning of the film we see the calm undulating fields of a small village, men going to work early in the morning. The pace is quickening, energy is mounting as the sturdy axles, shafts and pistons propel the boat to the open sea, and reaches its crescendo when the rich catch of fish is hauled in. The final caption tells us "[s]o to the ends of the earth goes the harvest of the sea." *Drifters* was first shown in a private film club

in London in late 1929 on a double-bill with Eisenstein's *The Battleship Potemkin* (which was not granted general licence in the UK until 1954), and received high praise from both its sponsors and the press (Grierson, 1929).

The parallels with contemporary Soviet film are not superficial. In Grierson's essay "First Principles of Documentary" (1932), he argued that film should observe life and that ordinary people—who are the original actors in their original environments are better suited to convey an interpretation of the modern world's message than fiction. These views aligned with Soviet film maker Dziga Vertov's dismissal of the "bourgeois excess" of dramatic fiction and with Sergei Eisenstein's well known filming techniques. Grierson's definition of the documentary film as the "creative treatment of actuality" has long been accepted, though it does not fit certain in-between type documentaries with staged characters and re-enacted situations. Some of Eisenstein's films were exactly that.

Some films of the documentary movement experimented with formal techniques, such as the Empire Marketing Board's *Industrial Britain* (Grierson, 1931) and *Song of Ceylon* (Basil Wright, 1934). Strong inspiration came to this type of documentary film from Alberto Cavalcanti, a Brazilian-born film maker who was played a pivotal role in the British documentary film movement between 1933 and the mid-1940s. Previously Cavalcanti had worked with avant-garde French film makers such as Jean Renoir and Marcel L'Herbier during the 1920s, and was familiar with modernist forms of film making (*Land of Promise*, 10). Cavalcanti's influence as producer, working with directors such as Basil Wright and Humphrey Jennings, is especially palpable in the experimental use of sound. *Spare Time* (Jennings, 1939), *Listen to Britain* (Jennings, 1942), *Coal Face* (Cavalcanti, 1935), and especially the towering achievement of the movement *Night Mail*, (Wright and Watt, 1936). The latter unapologetically borrowed from Soviet cinema to portray the postal train as a social integrator, its working class heroes connecting people both physically and socially across the width and length of the country.

Another strand of these films directly addressed the pressing need for social reform in Britain. These included *Workers and Jobs* (Elton, 1935), *Enough to Eat?* (Anstey, 1936), *Children at School* (Wright, 1937), and *Housing Problems* (Anstey and Elton, 1935). The last

of these landed with devastating effectiveness among those who had the opportunity to see it and is worth examining in this essay at length (*Land of Promise,* 11).

Housing Problems is both a propaganda piece and a documentation project; one of a handful of films produced by the movement that made it to the national canon of great British films. One reason for this was the direct approach. Ordinary people talking to the camera was then an immensely innovative technique. The voices and stories demonstrated the dreadful conditions of the pre-WW II slums in Britain the full horror of which must have been unknown to most who had not personally seen these places. The tenants talk 'matter-of-factly' about the deaths of their children, their daily battles with rodents and other vermin as the camera shows the pitiful dwellings and occasionally a close-up of some of the creepy insects blighting the lives of the people on screen. The film should be watched and studied together with Robert Roberts's ground breaking sociological study *The Classic Slum* (1971) in which life in the slums of Salford in the first quarter of the twentieth century is analysed with unsparing sociological rigour. The book and the film complement each other in more than one way, all the more surprising that this parallel is not made more widely.

The narrator (northern, non-RP pronunciation) in *Housing Problems* tells us: "When these houses were erected, anyone could build a factory right outside your front door... Many houses have not got water laid on. People have to manage as well as they can with a tap in the yard. And sometimes at the end of the street" (Anstey and Elton, 1935). The first testimony from an actual slum dweller comes from a Mr. Norwood. The fact that the witnesses are named lends their account added authenticity. It is as if we were watching and listening to exhibits as evidence in a court case. Norwood tells us, emotionally charged, yet not looking straight into the camera but possibly at prompts some distance away:

> These two rooms I'm in now I have to pay ten shillings a week for, and I haven't the room to swing a cat round. I've also got five other neighbours alongside of me with the same predicament as myself. I am not only overrun by bugs, I've got mice and rats. With the washing, my missus has to send out every little bit of

> washing there is. Every drop of water we have to go out in the yard for to fetch it in... Coming into these rooms I've had no luck since I've been in them. First I lost one youngster in one. Then I lost another youngster in one seven weeks after. (Anstey and Elton, 1935)

Another desperate tenant, Mrs. Hill, lit for the cameras by a footlight which lends an eerie atmosphere to the interview, has this to say:

> This house is getting on my nerves. We're shored up in every room. There's the staircase, that you can't walk up it unless you feel seasick. One leg you want longer than the other. And it's upstairs is coming downstairs, where it's sinking. We went to see the new houses and they are lovely. But here it gets on your nerves where everything's filthy. Dirty filthy walls and the vermin in the walls is wicked. [Crawling bugs are shown here for a few seconds.] So I will tell you we're fed up... What with the hole in the wall, I can't tell you how we have to manage. We just clear up in the daytime to keep the dirt out of our mouths, and that's all. You go up the stairs and you don't know whether you are coming down again or not... In fact everything in the house is on the crook. There's not a straight thing in it. What with the shoring up for the passage and the stairs and the coal cupboard, in fact we've got no convenience whatever. You're frightened to let the children upstairs in case they fall down. (Anstey and Elton, 1935)

The following testimony is, perhaps the most disconcerting. Mrs. Graves who had clearly been inextricably trapped in poverty and the tenement that is bound up with her economic situation is talking to the viewer, looking, unlike the others, directly into the camera:

> I've been here for twenty-four years. And this last one, it has been a misery to me... I went to bed early. I had a baby very bad. In the morning, instead of getting up for the children to... for school, they'd been awake all night, I let the children lie. And as the baby went to sleep for the first time. So I had a little black dog, kept running about. So I must have dozed off with the baby. Thinking it was the dog on me head,

> I looked up. Instead of that, it was a big rat. I screamed and ran out and left the baby. (Anstey and Elton, 1935)

Mr. Berner's family, wife and three children appear in the next cut. They are struggling to live, cook, eat, and sleep with a degree of cleanliness and decency in one room. No way to keep food overnight, but they have a washing facility in the back yard. Like most interviewees, Mr. Berner also expresses the hope that the council will provide "every working class man" with "hygienic conditions to live in." (Anstey and Elton, 1935)

The native sociolect used by the interviewees adds another layer of significance to this documentary. In a certain sense, this record of the language of urban poverty is comparable to the regional dialect collections of the folklorists of the same period. Except that, while hidden from the official public gaze, the people who speak in this film live in our midst not in far-flung islands or remote steppes.

Robert Roberts recalls the same atmosphere from the Salford of his childhood with enhanced literary sensitivity:

> No one scorned the clean modest half curtain, but a newspaper across the panes showed all too clearly that still another household had been forced to hoist the grey flag of poverty. Doors were painted brown and roughly grained: any tenants daring to use a colour gaily different would have been damned as playing 'baby house,' a serious indictment in a world where the activities of childhood and maturity were strictly separated. (Roberts 33)

Recalling the industrial action by seamen, firemen and dockers in June 1911, Roberts's tone darkens:

> A pitiless sun went down each day. Seamen, dockers, carters, miners stood in sullen little knots at a hundred slum street corners and talked and waited. A local priest spoke to the press of conditions:
>
> These men are not hooligans. I live among them and know their poverty... Home conditions are terrible. I often have to visit dying people in a room where a family of seven or eight lives. I have seen many instances

> of approaching starvation. One day I watched a man take off his coat and vest outside a pawn shop and, after a visit inside, give the money to a waiting child. (Roberts 96)

It is these textual vignettes, educational and emotionally stirring, but ultimately remaining academic, that comes alive in the socially motivated films of the documentary movement. In the aesthetic-experimental strand of the documentaries, perfectly exemplified in *Night Mail* (Wright and Watt, 1936), speed, movement, shade, dynamism, the life-giving essentials of the moving picture, played a defining role. In Grierson's words: "We could create rhythms and tempos, crescendos and diminuendos of energy to help our exposition... We could, by the juxtaposition of shots, explode ideas in the heads of our audience" (Grierson 22). Fewer visual experiments peculiar to the motion picture genre were deployed in the straight social documentary. Therefore, many of the images that pass through the film frames of the social documentaries remain with us as stills—iconic representations of the given theme. A photographic analysis approach, is, therefore, justified, in their case.

Roland Barthes the French post-structuralist critic linked the visual image with the sociological method. Writing about photographs (which he appreciated above film), Barthes declares: "it is a matter of studying human groups, of defining motives and attitudes, and of trying to link the behaviour of these groups to the social totality of which they are part" (Barthes 15). Also in the context of photography, Susan Sontag (writing well before the age of the pliable digital image) reiterates and adds to the above consideration of the authenticating, procreational function of the visual image:

> Photographed images do not seem to be statements about the world so much as pieces of it. [...] Photographs furnish evidence. Something we hear about, but doubt, seems proven when we're shown a photograph of it [...] the camera record incriminates [...] the camera record justifies [...] The picture may distort; but there is always a presumption that something exists, or did exist, which is like what's in the picture. (Sontag 4–5)

By Grierson's time, local government had the authority to pull down unhealthy slums and build new, open plan housing estates with modern amenities. This was far from being an exclusively left-wing agenda. It was the future Conservative Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain (of appeasement fame) who, (still as a Liberal Unionist) Birmingham City Councillor, headed the City Planning Committee in his native city, and, as early as 1911 pioneered healthy suburban housing development projects, which included the provision of running water and hygienic toilet facilities, especially for newly built dwellings. Significantly, the city government was allowed to take over property if the private sector failed to live up to the new standards. Other major cities, like Liverpool, adopted similar programmes, and the Unhealthy Areas Committee of the British Parliament (1919–21), of which Chamberlain was chairman (after having been elected to Parliament in 1918), was arguably also modelled on his own committee politics for urban reform in Birmingham (Pepper and Richmond). As health minister, Chamberlain introduced the Housing Act in 1923. These were Conservative (or Unionist as the Conservatives were then called) measures and drives. At the other end of the spectrum, Sidney and Beatrice Webb and Charles Booth were campaigning, researching and writing about living conditions from a radical leftist perspective. Booth's massive (the third edition totalling seventeen volumes) survey entitled *Life and Labour of the People of London* (1902–3) examined the lives and occupations of the working class people of London often on a street-by-street basis.

By around 1927, many east-central European and Mediterranean countries adopted or were compelled to adopt populist-corporatist methods of government and National Socialism triumphed in Germany at the beginning of 1933. The solutions to endemic poverty of the interwar years offered by the right were often indistinguishable from those of the left. Except that, having abandoned the New Economic Policy first introduced by Lenin, from around 1928, Stalin's regime in the Soviet Union set out on a massive state housing development to satisfy the increased urban demand. Most of the new homes, however, showed persistent signs of faulty craftsmanship, which led to vocal complaints sustained even by some of the most dedicated devotees of the Soviet system (Sidney

and Beatrice Webb 931–940). These failures of mass urban construction, led to the idea, peculiar to the U.S.S.R., of dwelling-communes or dwelling beehives (Teige). The Federal Housing Administration in the United States, created in 1934 as part of Roosevelt's New Deal, did not fit into the populist models as it did not aim at state or local government construction of homes for tenants: through the insurance of mortgage loans, it made possible and/or significantly increased home ownership in the United States.

Elton and Anstey's witnesses firmly believe in a brighter future, symbolised by healthy social tenant housing in Britain. The reality, however turned out to be different. The Quarry Road Estate in Leeds, introduced in *Housing Problems* as an exemplary project, the hope of Mr. Norwood, Mrs. Hill, Mrs. Graves and Mr. Berner, "with a welfare centre, a shopping centre and all kinds of amenities" (Anstey and Elton, 1935) was never fully completed, little more was built there than some basic housing. There were no socialist or corporatist solutions on offer to the social and economic ills in Britain. Neither was there a British New Deal. The British solution came with the 'natural' suburbianisation of urban dwelling. By the end of the 1930s, the prospect appeared to be that "the much-desired rehousing of the inhabitants of the vast, dreary Victorian quarters of our towns will take place in new suburbs beyond the recent suburbs" (Sharp 40–41). The 'flight to suburbia' had something to do with an acquired dislike for town dwelling as such. The neither town, nor country suburbia of Britain was thus born.

The British Documentary Film movement produced their work across a twenty-year period through the conduit of a number of quasi-government institutions, of which the Empire Marketing Board Film Unit was one. When the Empire Marketing Board was wound up in 1933, Sir Stephen Tallents and Grierson moved to the General Post Office (GPO) Film Unit whose turn it was to host the directors, cameramen and producers of the documentary film movement. It may be argued that the GPO film united served as the UK's first film school. The message of the films produced by the unit had an unmistakably, if not radically, socialist edge. The new film unit continued to look for new ways to communicate with the public under the aegis of the General Post Office.

The propaganda requirements of the Second World

War acted for the film unit almost as a dénouement in the sense that it finally had the opportunity to deliver on all the ambitions and expectations that Grierson and others had had imagined for it. Although Grierson was only in charge until 1937 (from 1938 he started working for the Canadian government) and the unit was renamed the Crown Film Unit from 1940, documentary film making and social propaganda came of age in Britain during this period. Although at the end of the war the Crown Film Unit became part of the new Central Office of Information, the ethos of its film makers remained unbroken. The new films included a rare foray by some of the movement's producers and directors into life in rural Britain under the aegis of Greenpark Productions. Between 1944 and 1947 unique portraits of life in the agricultural regions of Britain (e.g. *The Grassy Shires*, Ralph Keene, 1944; *Cornish Valley*, Keene, 1944; *Fenlands*, Ken Annakin, 1945; *Downlands*, Charles de Latour and Humphrey Swingler, 1947) were produced. Britain's comprehensive social rebirth after the war under Attlee's Labour Government is hard to dissociate from the vibrant social and economic optimism exuded by the images of the films made by the members of the documentary film movement (*Addressing the Nation* 7–9).

Ironically, much as John Grierson and his colleagues were preparing to be the prophets of a new, popular cinematic genre, in reality these documentary productions were seen only be a few. While they had set out to achieve the maximum public enlightenment and a new art form at the same time, exploratory visual experiments and social documentaries were not the staple of the British cinema going public whose numbers were steadily expanding in the 1930s. Yet, when Emeric Pressburger and Alexander Korda arrived on the British scene from the early to mid-1930s with the new agenda of popular entertainment, they found the core of a technically mature and socially sensitive film making community with whom they could set out to conquer the attention of the wider public.

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